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AUTHOR Robbins, Dot
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ABSTRACT

The teaching of German in America is analyzed from a postmodernism perspective and in comparison with the long-term commitment to learning a foreign language in Europe. Two points are considered: (1) most innovative teaching methodologies were derived in the 1970s from humanist psychology, not from second language acquisition theory; and (2) the core of most American foreign language textbooks is grammar. An argument is presented for using German fairy tales as an instructional approach. Among the reasons are the following: students are empowered because they know the story; the content is simple; there is a sense of closure in that students can master many aspects of a foreign language and feel that there is a stopping point; students can compare cultural similarities and differences by analyzing how the same fairy tales are presented in different languages and contexts; and teachers who have little exposure to the target culture also feel empowered. "Little Red Riding Hood" is used as an example of how a German fairy tale can be used in the classroom. Contains 13 references. (LB)

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Abstract:
This paper analyzes the teaching of German in America, under the aspect of postmodernism. It makes a short comparision of the long-term commitment to learning a foreign language in Europe.
In introducing the problem, two points are mentioned: 1. most innovative teaching methodologies were derived in the 1970s from humanist psychology, not from second language acquisition, 2. the core of most American foreign language textbooks is grammar.
In looking at the solution, German fairytales are used as an example of some of the goals of all foreign language learning: the students are empowered, because they know the story; the content is simple, yet the students are reduced in no way; there is a sense of 'closure', where the students can master many aspects of a foreign language, and feel that there is a stopping point; there is the chance of comparing similarities and differences of cultures, by analyzing how the same fairytales are presented in different languages and contexts; teachers who have little exposure to the target culture of the language they are teaching, also feel empowered when teaching fairytales, etc.

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Postmodernist America and the Teaching
of Traditional German Fairy Tales (Little Red Cap)

Stating the Problem: Within postmodernist America, many processes including education are now based on a fast paced approach, which is 'image' driven.

Since students have come to expect the simulacrum (a copy of a copy, where the original is no longer present), and 'anything goes', it is difficult to deconstruct the contemporary FL paradigm, which is interwoven in the total American educational system.

More and more teaching methods are based on a quick, snappy approach, since the students' attention span often seems to correlate with the average length between T.V. commercials.

Indeed, many schools are adopting new T.V. oriented approaches to learning, such as foreign languages by satellite, or news broadcasts filmed for schools, etc., all of which can positively influence education, when used appropriately.

When analyzing the meaning of electronic technology (here T.V.) for educational purposes, it is interesting to note that in the early days of T.V. (1950s and 1960s), most programs were orginally based on the old radio shows, all of which required a sense of phantasy and completion by the viewer (or listener). The weekly shows presented a feeling of closure, usually with strands of morality interwoven into the themes. This feeling of participation and closure led the viewers (and listeners) to reflect on what indeed had happened.

Today, the old fashioned sense of phantasy has been replaced by assumed viewer expectations, all of which reflect instant viewer interest, translated into viewer ratings.

The American educational system is now in the process of adopting T.V. ideas to all areas of learning, much of which is also learner centered, representing an inverted ordering system, ultimately making education entertaining, with concomitant student ratings.

This is a total reversal of traditional educational values, and should be viewed together with the fact that in 1991 alone, the SAT scores fell by 14%.

Turning to the FL component of the American educational system, it appears that similar trends are taking place with many FL teaching methodologies now used to produce more fun-filled activities, with less anxiety and stress.

Yet, at the same time, there is a codified system in place for establishing various levels of FL proficiency, however, with very few students (here, foreign language majors and minors) reaching higher levels of proficiency, even after their college/university experience.

In viewing trends of teaching FL in Europe, The Threshold Level (1) comes to mind, with the inclusion of the notional-functional approach. For example, functional categories describe how language can be used, while notional categories are semantico-grammatical, and differ from the American approach, which uses a breakdown of language proficiency into various competencies.

In Europe, the FL materials are established within thematic contexts, emphasizing everyday speech over formal textbook conversation. As a result of this approach, students in Europe are not only introduced to current social topics, but they also engage in culturally controversial issues, gaining true insight into the bicultural component of learning and processing an FL. (2).

It is interesting to note that within the section on Landeskunde at the 1991 'Deutsch Als Fremdsprache' conference (held at the Humboldt University in Berlin-East), there was no mention of the word 'proficiency', nor was there reference to the concept.

What was referred to was terminology such as: 'kulturbezogenes Lernen', 'interkulturelles Lernen'.

Here in the United States, many foreign language teachers realize the problems involved with various teaching methodologies...

One stumbling block continues to revolve around the fact that English serves as the world's lingua franca. Another problem is the 'fun and games' orientation, with the concomitant expectation of reaching only low levels of FL proficiency.
This approach is coupled with an over emphasis of grammar, and little bicultural critical thinking exercises.
These problems, however, are being recognized and are slowly finding a voice, such as ..."it is remarkable that foreign language programs are not known for their commitment to international education...To outside observers, the way we teach language seems to be unrelated to communication and the way we study texts too constrained within the framework of literary history" (3).

One of the basic problems with FL teaching in America today is a sense of micro-orientation, which assumes that communicative competence is opposed to proficiency. However, communicative competence is basically a metaphor (4), and oral proficiency represents a set of criteria used as a guideline for establishing the competencies gained.
With these two approaches diametrically opposing each other, it still remains a fact that approximately 10 to 15 % of all college and university students are studying a foreign language, with only American Ph.D's possibly getting through their studies without a functional knowledge of one foreign language. (5)
Even with attempts at critical thinking, learner centered approaches, infantilization (Lozanov), problematization (Freire), lateral thinking (de Bono), etc., America's level of FL proficiency remains very low by international standards.
The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center maintains that it takes 750 hours of concentrated study- 30 hours a week for 25 weeks at the Institute, for the average speaker to learn basic French (Chronicle of Higher Education, February 22, 1989).

3 extra

If a student had a requirement of 32 hours in order to receive a major (which is the norm), then he/she would only receive approximately 594 hours of classroom training, assuming that three hours of instruction were given a week for 18 weeks for one 3 credit hour course. Within the required hours for a major, the focus is usually on obtaining the basic skills for linguistic competency, with the final amount of time given to civilization and literature courses (this summary is simply an approximation).

Postmodernist Foreign Language Teaching:

Some of the categories of postmodernist society are : the de-centered self, simulation, lack of critical distance, simulacrum, apocalytic implosion, deconstruction, aliention, problem of legimation, complicity, allusion, narcissism, 'anything goes'.

Indeed, with these new emerging characteristics the traditional modes of deriving 'meaning' must be re-structured, especially for the FL classroom.

With the new innovative teaching methodologies, two aspects tend to surface, which afford clues to the proficiency problem in America.

1. Most of the innovative teaching methodologies have been derived in the 1970s from humanist psychology, which often supports the "I'm OK, You're OK" philosophy. The methods often have superior results, although they cannot be used systematically in traditional settings.

With this in mind, many FL teachers have gone eclectic, sometimes using cuisinnaire rods (Silent Way), or commands (Total Physical Response), or using background music to help reinforce the learning of vocabulary (Lozanov), etc. One of the outstanding features of these approaches represents a lowering of the affective filter (Krashen), or lowered anxiety, yet they are not designed for the long-term commitment of becoming proficient in a foreign language, usually addressing the initial stages of the target language.

On the other hand, it has been difficult to make textbooks truly communicative, because the traditional testing modes usually remain the same. It is easier to attune the books to a proficiency approach, setting down semantico-grammatical categories to be learned, which can be statistically verified.

2. The core of most foreign language textbooks is grammar!

Students may conceivably complete as much as a year or more in a particular target language, without truly realizing that different cultures solve problems differently. There seems to be very little emphasis on biculturality within a critical thinking mode.

Foreign language students are rarely introduced to cultural differentiations, and it is important to realize that many foreign language teachers simply do not feel empowered to branch out and discuss such issues (even in the mother tongue), because of a personal lack of exposure to the target culture.

Strategies Used in Solving the Problem: It is within this framework that two simple strategies will be given, namely, 1. student preparation before starting a course in an FL, using the tenets of postmodernism to initially explain the situation the student faces, 2. traditional fairytales, here Little Red Riding Hood.

1. First, students should understand that they are living in the postmodernist age, and that becoming proficient in the target language represents the antithesis of postmodernism...it demands time, commitment, critical self evaluation, and hard work and discipline.
When beginning an Fl class, it is important to sit down and explain the differences in learning an FL and learning other courses (as redundant as that may sound). It is also important for students to establish their own learning styles (global or analytic, for example), and for the teacher to state his or her preference personally, to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding in the future.
There are certain points each teacher can work out to help the students realize that learning another language is somewhat different from learning other subjects. For example, it is very cyclical, meaning that repetition is extremely important. This also implies that students will have good and bad days, since speaking an FL is an integral part of her/his emotional makeup, and is very personal. On some days students will not want to respond, and this should be accepted. All skills should be balanced, realizing that receptive skills are just as important as productive ones. Students should not be made to feel they must produce orally in every class period.
Teachers should also explain that they will be using child-like approaches to elicit responses, but that doesn't mean that the student, nor the approach is reduced in any way. In fact, only in this way can real progress be made. A catch 22 should also be given..in most high school or college/university programs there is room for communicative games, however, when it comes to exams, they are usually very traditional in nature, and parallel most other courses. It is important for teachers to build in different approaches to testing, which reflect the four skills.

Learning to be bilingual is only half the picture...Teachers should be aware of disseminating cultural information via critical thinking skills, so that their students can learn to reflect through contextual problem solving. Being bilingual and bicultural has often had extreme negative overtones in the United States, both historically and culturally. These prejudices should be approached with various levels of solving differentiated exercises (i.e. viewing the typical sterotypical images on T.V.). It is often fruitful to discuss how Americans are perceived abroad with their prevalent sense of monolingualism, quasi-monoculturalism.

In motivating students to take a long-term, committed approach to foreign languages, the teacher can help out by encouraging students to keep a notebook of vocabulary, a diary of personal triumphs and frustrations, and by presenting a one minute evaluation at the end of each classroom period.

Since many students will not travel abroad it is important to find a modus operandi for branching out into a fiction, which can be objectified, then relativized within the postmodernist sense of closure. This feeling of empowerment is often accomplished through short termed, total-immersion weekends, where the participants are willing to immerse themselves in the game, applying new sets of rules. Some of these new rules include the dichotomous structuring of material towards infantilization (Lozanov) and conscientization (Freire), or consciousness raising.

Since most FL courses are presented traditionally, it cannot be expected that learners come to class with their undivided attention on the foreign language..they are probably studying other subjects at the same time.

In rethinking a system of immersion within a short time framework, as well as a system of fiction (where the student can step outside of her/himself in order to be less self conscious), one needs to add on the element of closure. Within the typical learning situation, students are usually overwhelmed with what is to be learned, rather than with the feeling of awe and joy of experiencing something new.

The method chosen at this stage is the traditional fairytale, because it represents a fiction. It doesn't have to be taken so seriously,

because the learner is already in on the plot. It represents a unit, which at some point will be finished, giving the learner a feeling of knowing that something has been accomplished.
FL students often have difficulty learning how to communicate on a child-like level, thinking that it is somehow childish. However, within the paramters of a fairytale, the learner is placed in a situation of being forced to simplify language structures.

The Example of Little Red Riding Hood: German fairytales are experiencing a revival in general. They are being taught at many graduate schools (i.e. University of Kentucky) and at the 1990 AATG conference there were sessions on "The Fairy Tale and Technology", "Social Criticism and Prophesy in Recent GDR Fairy Tales"., etc..
According to Heuschner, a fairy tale is a pictorial language. "Fairy Tales are narrations which, contrary to the Epos or Saga, do not base on or originate from more or less historic persons and events, but which describe the 'fantastic', the mysterious'... (Heuschner 4).
Fairy Tales encourage the reader to participate and become involved, hopefully relating the events to one's own struggles and conflicts.
Bettelheim maintains that "the deep inner conflicts orginating in our primitve drives and our violent emotions are all denied in much of modern children's literature, and so the child is not helped in coping with them. The fairy tale, by contrast, takes these existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously" (Bettelheim 10).
Fairy tales are often based on Folktales, which are usually oral by nature. Fairy tales stand in close relation to legends and sagas, all of these going back to the myth. It is interesting to note that myths contain contradictions, while the fairy tale has done away with persisting contradictions, showing that myths are actually closer to our real lives (cf. Fühmann 95-99). For that reason, fairy tales can be used in the FL classroom as a type of meta-fiction, and total-immersion into situational structuring, with the intention of lowered anxiety.

Assuming that it is easier for FL learners to understand the usage of concrete objects first, then the fairy tale is ideal, because there is clarity of details. "The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent--not good and bad at the same time, as we all are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad and nothing inbetween" (Bettelhiem 9).

Fairy tales talk about everyone, people we can somehow identify with, using generic, not specific names such as: Hansel and Gretel, The Ugle Duckling, Jack and the Bean Stalk, Little Red Cap, etc. Often other characters remain nameless, being called King, Queen, Witch, Mother, Stepmother.

Even though events are out of the ordinary, they are presented as if they were natural, and the although the child realizes that she/he cannot match the standard of the hero, there is a direct involvment and bonding. Within the foreign language setting this type of structuring can facilitate ease with all four skills, especially with production. Even though speaking the foreign language is often intimidating,with the fairy tale there is a sense of empowerment, just as the child experiences.

Apart from the reduction of anxiety in the FL classroom, fairy tales are a way of teaching culture. Little Red Riding Hood has a different feel in German, than in English. She carries cake and wine to the ailing grandmother, who will become stronger as a result of these gifts. One can now discuss the differences of fairy tales in various cultures, and their impact on American culture. For example, in many American cities, Little Red Riding Hood is not allowed in childrens' libraries because of the wine.

In the French version, the "credulous little girl is tricked by the sweet-talking wolf into taking off her clothes and joining him in bed" (Obergfell 443), noting that the wolf has on no disguise in this version.

The following is a protrayal of Little Red Riding Hood from Heuschner:"Little Red Cap is not the rejected, hungry child of poor and selfish parents, barely having a piece of dry bread to her name; she is the nicely dressed girl who, from the abundance of her home and with the blessings, admonitions and protection of her mother, carries food to the grandmother. The forest is not a horrible place with frightening wild animals, in which one gets lost: a good path leads from Little Red Cap's town to grandmother's home. The child does not have to mark a path, the path is already there, and mother warns her not to stray from it, lest she fall and break the glass (of wine..). The mother also admonishes her to go greet the grandmother and not to peek first into all the corners of the room, since she senses the daughter's readiness to look at the seductive physical world around her. And the wolf arrives to tempt her, to point out to her the beauties and pleasures of the material surroundings: the pretty flowers, the lovely songs of the birds, and the merry sunrays dancing through the trees. As the wolf speaks to her, the girl lifts her eyes to all the beauty around her, convinced that it would be foolish to go on directly to grandmother, and justifying her leaving her path by deciding to pick a bouquet of flowers for the dear old woman. And while Little Red Cap wanders deeper and deeper into the forest, the wolf runs straight to the grandmother's house, gains entrance by pretending to be the girl, swallows the woman, puts on her clothes, dresses himself in her cap, and lays himself in her bed waiting for the young child's arrival". (Heuschner 74)

At this stage there is much discussion as to whether Little Red Cap is a small child, or an adolescent. Whether the red cap represents an historical aspect, such as the French Revolution (where the Jacobians wore red hats, with this story being passed down by Perrault around this time), or whether the girl is now in the stage of puberity, with the sexual and developmental implications involved.

Indeed, much cultural discussion can also be generated from a small book on a comparison of Little Red Cap, titled: Die Geschichte vom Rotkäppchen: Ursprünge, Analysen, Parodien eines Märchens (Hans Ritz). This small book is easy to read, with short chapters.

There is not only an analysis on the various aspects of this fairy tale (especially the psychological side), but there are funny, short new versions, such as: Red Riding Hood in East Germany, Red Riding Hood in American Military Jargon, Red Riding Hood with a view to mathematics, Red Riding Hood and Franz Josef Strauß.
As well, one can order a short video of Red Riding Hood, and a cassette and children's book (6).

In closing, it is hoped that students and teachers will be able to recognize the American postmodern situation, and attempt to rename some of the elements important for student linguistic empowerment in a foreign language, hopefully encouraging a long-term commitment to proficiency.
The use of fairy tales, here Little Red Riding Hood, has been reintroduced with the hopes of using them as a means of language facility, as a structure for critical, cultural discussions and for return of amusement into the classroom. Both traditional grammar can be presented in relation to the fairy tales, as well as innovative teaching methodologies.
Every foreign language teacher should realize that we have entered a new age (the age of postmodernism), yet the old categories are still very much in place, which confuses both students and teachers. Using both traditional approaches, innovative approaches and technology can result in FL linguistic success, with the necessary commitment to discipline and long term learning.
If a teacher is secure in her/his didactic strategies, presenting a fairy tale makes sense to students. They can act it out, write a new version, etc. The important factor involved for students is that they realize that they indeed can become fluent in a foreign language. Yet, most of them are starting out at a later stage than in European countries. With that in mind, students realize that they have to start from the beginning, and that fairy tales facilitate easy in accomplishing that, without reducing the student in any way.

It is hoped that with such a strategy, students would then be encouraged to continue with the target language, being motivated to learn the grammar that will truly empower them to become proficient.

Notes

1. For more information on the Threshold Level, see: Kontaktschwelle: Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Markus Baldegger (Ed.). Berlin: Langenscheidt, 1985.

2. Sichtwechsel: Developing Language Sensitivity. Martin Hog (Ed.), New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
   Students are not only introduced to current social topics in German-speaking countries, but they can also engage in conversation about controversial issues, gaining true insight into the bicultural component of learning a foreign language. Some of the topics covered are: abortion, pro life , the Wall, single parenting, homosexuality, breast feeding in a park in Europe, older people living alone, etc.

3. Patrick M McConeghy, "The German Program and International Education" in Unterrichtspraxis, Spring 1990, p. 7.

4. The idea that communicative competence is a metaphor was stated by Basil Bernstein in a private conversation in 1982 in London.

5. Paul Simon, The Tongue-Tied American. New York: Continuum Press, 1980.

6. The video of Little Red Riding Hood can be obtained from: The children's book and cassette can be obtained from: Miller International, Schallplatten GmbH. 2085 Quickborn bei Hamburg, Germany. Also the Goethe Institut has excellent teaching materials on fairy tales.

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